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ABSTRACT

Studies of student persistence in higher education often concentrate on members of ethnic minority groups who fail to persist. A study was conducted concentrating on the successes of persisting students and representing a preliminary effort to develop a model of student competency. The population consisted of 70 new first-time full-time Native American freshmen enrolled at a southwestern state university in fall, 1984. Results included the following: (1) traditional-age students tended to persist at a higher rate than more mature students; (2) 1 year after entry, few persisters were from the bottom half of their graduating class; and (3) no conditionally admitted students persisted after 3 years. Portions of interviews with selected students are provided, and cultural difference connected to persistence are discussed. Findings suggested that higher education must develop an appreciation for cultural diversity in defining and reinforcing student competencies which enhance persistence. Contains 50 references. (Author/KM)

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Native American Persistence In Higher Education: Toward A Competency Model

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NATIVE AMERICAN PERSISTENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: TOWARD A COMPETENCY MODEL

ABSTRACT

Studies of student persistence in higher education often concentrate on members of ethnic minority groups and, typically, such studies focus on the characteristics of students who fail to persist. Such a focus emphasizes student deficiencies. The present study concentrates on the successes of persisting students and represents a preliminary effort to develop a model of student competency. The study group is a cohort of Native American freshmen who entered a four-year comprehensive university in Fall 1984. The methodology combines statistical and social science research techniques. Findings suggest that higher education must develop an appreciation for cultural diversity in defining and reinforcing student competencies which enhance persistence.

Introduction

A number of studies of student persistence in higher education concentrate on the characteristics of students who fail to persist (Spady, 1970, 1971; Munro, 1981; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Bennett and Bean, 1984; Loo and Robison, 1986; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1988). Considering the individual, fiscal, and societal costs associated with the failure to complete college, it is not uncommon for this research to also address the higher rates of attrition found among ethnic minorities.

Minorities have long struggled to enter and succeed in higher education and now a new sense of urgency is attached to studying their dropout dilemma. Ethnic minorities are fast approaching numerical dominance in certain sections of the nation, particularly the American southwest. In this fast-growing region, population projections indicate that by the start of the 21st century, the majority of people under 30 will be members of an ethnic minority group (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1987, 1988; American Council on Education and the Education Commission of the States, 1988; Estrada, 1988; Winston and Justiz, 1988). Whether this new majority population "will be afforded appropriate opportunities to enter, perform, and succeed in higher education" or whether its members "may never benefit from the intellectual development, humanistic appreciation, potential employment, and economic advancement which stem from a college education," has largely been framed as a question of access to, and persistence in, America's colleges and universities (Cibik and Chambers, 1988).

In considering the phenomenon of departure from college, the major constructs of Tinto's model have largely withstood the test of time (Baumgart and Johnstone, 1977; Terenzini and Pascarella, 1977; Terenzini, 1978, 1980; Munro, 1981; Aiken, 1982; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Terenzini, Pascarella, Theophilidels, and Lorang, 1985). In general, Tinto's model maintains that the student is influenced by a wide range of experiences prior to college and upon matriculation. These experiences, depending upon the student's interaction with them, may tend to pull him or her toward or away from an ideal state of social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college (Tinto, 1987). For students in general, separation from past communities and memberships, coupled with the often bewildering challenges of college life, contribute to departure (Cope and Hannah, 1975; Lamont, 1979; Tinto, 1988). Minority students are at especially high risk of "malintegration" (Loo and Robison, 1986; Nora, 1987). Furthermore, for minority students at predominately white institutions the necessary social, cultural, and mental adjustments are often simply insurmountable (Allen, 1987; Beckham, 1988).

Making a sufficient adjustment to college to persist and graduate is a formidable challenge for those from ethnic minority groups; this has been particularly so for Native American Indians. Among minorities striving to complete college, Native Americans have long been reported to be among the least, if not the least, successful (Astin, 1982; Falk and Aitken, 1984; Tijerina and Biemer, 1988). Barriers to the success of Native Americans may be similar to those faced by other ethnic minorities in adjusting to the college environment, but may also be rooted in perceptual and cognitive style differences which place them at odds with the dominant culture (Topper, 1972; Werner, Schoepfle, Bouck, Roan, and Yazzie, 1976; Osborne, 1985).

It seems rare, given the obstacles, that any Native Americans--especially those who strive to maintain their cultural identity--can succeed in a higher education system dominated by the powerful and persuasive influences of the white majority culture. And yet, they do. Despite the rarity of this achievement, or perhaps because of it, little attention has been focused on Native American achievers. This extraordinary group is the subject of the present study.

We have chosen to focus on this relatively select group because we feel the tone of existing research tends to discount the achievements of Native Americans. In its extreme, research on ethnic minority students which focuses primary attention on those who fail can project the prejudicial, ethnocentric attitude that certain cultural groups are inherently deficient in their ability to persist in the college environment. Such a focus, apart from its racial overtones, can foster lowered expectations on the part of college teachers and administrations, and lowered aspirations on the part of minority students themselves. For this reason, we have elected to move from the relatively negative position of studying Native American dropouts to a more positive approach by focusing attention on the successes of persisting Native Americans.

Methodology

Our methodology involved the use of a combination of statistical approaches and social science research techniques (Spradley, 1979; Werner and Schoepfle, 1987). This methodology was employed because Native Americans differ in persistence and educational attainment from most college students (including other ethnic minorities) and because the reasons for these differences are not readily apparent.

Study Population

The population used in this study consisted of 70 new first-time full-time Native American freshmen enrolling at a medium-size southwestern state university beginning in fall 1984. Of those indicating a tribal affiliation, the majority (46) were Navajo, the remainder were Hopi (5); White Mountain Apache (3); Zuni (2); and San Carlos Apache, Narmbe Pueblo, Alaskan Aleut, and Lunga (1 each).

Demographic factors of the study group included:

* 59% were female
* Average age at college entry was 19 years; within range from 17 to 35 years of age
* 20% were admitted to the university on condition (probationary, or specific requirements to make up academic deficiencies)
* All graduated from a rural Arizona or Reservation high school. Portions of some reservations, notably the expansive Navajo Nation, extend into more than one state.

The academic traits indicated that a small portion of the study group had performed well in high school, and thus had demonstrated competencies for college success. Most exhibited marginal academic traits. Of those providing high school and ACT information, the following academic profile was assembled:

* 7% had earned a 3.5 to 4.0 (on a 4.0 scale) grade point average in high school; another 88% had maintained at least a 2.0 grade point average
* 48% had graduated in the top one-quarter of their high school class; 70% had graduated in the top one-half of their class
* The mean high school graduation rank percentile was 71
* The mean ACT composite score was 14.1, with a low score of 6 and a high score of 22. This composite score is slightly lower than the national mean of 14.5 for Native American freshmen, and substantially below the national mean of 18.8 for all freshmen in fall 1984.

Persistence Trends

The study group demonstrated low rates of persistence over a four year period. From the original cohort, 46% continued uninterrupted study after one year. Twenty-two percent remained after two years, and 10% after three years. Another 10% of the original cohort re-enrolled after stopping out at least one semester during these four years. None of the 1984 freshmen had graduated by fall 1988.

Such high attrition rates signal a disparity compared to recent national trends where 40% of 1981 entering freshmen had completed an undergraduate degree or persisted after four years (Cooperative Institutional Research Program, 1986). However, this low rate of persistence is not uncommon among other cohorts of Native American college students (Arizona Board of Regents, 1989).

The following patterns regarding the persistence and competencies of the Native American group compared to non-Native American groups were observed.

Typical for both Native American and non-Native American groups, the study found that:

* Traditional age students entering college at 18 years tended to persist at higher rates than more mature students.

* A larger portion of persisters were represented in the top one-quarter of their graduating high school class. One year after entry, few persisters were from the bottom one-half of their graduation class.

* Longer term persisters had measurably higher ACT composite scores than the entering cohort.

* Students entering the university on conditional admittance did not persist at the same rate of unconditional admits. No conditionally admitted students persisted after three years.

* The mean cumulative grade point average of persisters increased after each subsequent semester. The cumulative GPA of fourth year persisters was 0.66 of a grade point higher than that of the entering cohort.

Persistence Trends
First-Time, Full-Time Native American Freshmen
Fall 1984 to Fall 1988

	Original N	Semesters After Entry							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number Persisting	70	60	32	24	14	13	9	9	7
Demographics Variables									
Gender									
N Male	29	25	13	12	8	6	5	4	3
N Female	41	35	19	12	6	7	4	5	4
Residence									
N Resident	56	51	29	22	13	12	8	8	6
N Non-Resident	14	9	3	2	1	1	1	1	1
Age									
Mean Years at Entry	19.0	18.5	18.0	18.2	18.2	18.1	18.2	18.2	18.1
Academic Variables									
HSGPA									
N 4.0 - 3.5	4	4	4	3	1	1	1	1	1
N 3.4 - 3.0	27	24	11	9	5	5	3	3	2
N 2.9 - 2.5	13	12	8	7	3	3	3	3	2
N 2.4 - 2.0	9	9	5	3	2	2	1	1	1
N Below 2.0	17	11	4	2	3	2	1	1	1
HS Rank in Class									
N Top 1/4	27	25	16	13	8	7	4	5	5
N Top 1/2	22	21	11	7	5	5	4	3	2
N Bottom 1/2	21	14	5	4	1	1	1	1	0
Composite ACT Score	14.1	14.1	15.1	15.7	16.5	16.1	16.9	17.0	16.6
Admit Status									
N Unconditional	56	52	29	21	13	12	9	9	7
N Conditional	14	8	3	3	1	1	0	0	0
Mean Sem GPA	1.66	1.29	1.66	1.48	2.05	2.13	2.02	1.50	2.00
Mean Cum. GPA	1.66	1.48	1.81	1.73	2.14	2.27	2.27	2.15	2.32
N Returns	0	0	1	7	3	4	7	7	5

In contrast to non-Native American groups, the study found:

* Native Americans who had marginal pre-college academic attributes (in terms of high school grade average), were nearly as equally represented among long-term persisters as those with higher high school grades. Conversely, many who had done well in high school did not persist.

* To a lesser extent the above pattern was also seen with Native Americans who graduated near the top or the bottom of their high school class.

* While the average composite ACT score for long-term Native American persisters was above that of the entering cohort, a nearly equal number at both ends of this range did not persist.

Established competencies for college entrance across the nation include pre-college academic factors, such as high school grade average and high school rank, and scores on standardized achievement tests such as ACT or SAT. Admission standards using these criteria are widespread and are founded on their association with college achievement and their predictive value in identifying those who will succeed in college and those who will not.

Standards for college admission have been in place for decades and such standards, or higher, are applied to nearly all groups of students seeking college entrance. However, in the case of Native Americans these measures are less than reliable predictors of college success.

In this study, the relationship of high school grade average, high school graduation rank, and composite ACT score were examined as compared to cumulative grade average one year after entrance for Native Americans and an equal number test cohort group of white students.

Correlation and regression statistics suggest at least modest reliability and predictability between college cumulative grade average for the white student persisters and high school grade average ($r = .748$, $r^2 = .548$), high school rank ($r = .752$, $r^2 = .566$; and less significant, composite ACT score ($r = .507$, $r^2 = .257$).

In the case of Native American persisters little reliability or

predictability was found. Cumulative college grade average for this cohort was not significantly associated with their high school grade average ($r = .317$, $r^2 = .100$), high school rank ($r = .071$, $r^2 = -.005$) or composite ACT score ($r = .049$, $r^2 = .002$). In effect, a Native American who had made good grades in high school, who graduated at the top of his or her high school class, and had done well on the ACT exam, was just as likely to poorly perform in college academics as a Native American who had measured deficiencies in these criteria. The opposite of this situation is also true.

Clearly this finding points to an anomaly. Current notions of persistence and attrition suggest, by and large, that competent students prevail and deficient students dropout. Yet, something else appears to be operating among Native Americans; something for which present measures appear unable to account. We are searching for that "something" and in doing so we have chosen to interview persisting students for clues to hitherto unrecognized elements of competence which contribute to persistence.

The Interviews

This section of our report contains excerpts from interviews with Native American students conducted between February 1988 and March 1989. A total of eleven students (seven women and four men) were interviewed. All are Navajo. Four were students who had "dropped-out" after their freshmen year, but had returned during the time of the study. The remainder were persisters.

The students spoke--sometimes reluctantly, sometimes freely--with the understanding that notes and tape recordings would be transcribed, but not attributed directly to them. Names are fictitious and are used primarily to communicate gender to the reader.

As for grammar and syntax, the reader should remember that responses were made in informal, conversational sessions where rules of formal speech did not apply. Responses should not, therefore, be interpreted as evidence that these students are more or less articulate than their age peers of other races. Interviews were often punctuated with lengthy periods of silence, a phenomenon which appears typical of the Native American tendency to "process" before speaking.

The format for each of the following sections includes a brief statement of the issue or question which we are attempting to clarify followed by representative interview excerpt, and a brief conclusion exploring whether subject "testimony" relates to competency issues, suggests the need for further questioning, reveals discrepancies, points to consensus, etc.

You Can't Go Home Again

When Thomas Wolfe penned that insightful title, he apparently had in mind the impracticality of the human tendency to cling to the familiar. We lament that our modern, transient lives pull us far from our roots; far from family and known surroundings. Consider that the Native American student feels this same desire for continuity. And consider also that his or her desire is rooted solidly in centuries of tradition. And, finally, consider that the issue of to go or not to go home is, for the Native American, much more than a philosophical question. When the Native Americans in the present study speak of "going home", they are not merely referring to a brief commute. Navajos, for example, could live anywhere on a reservation of 25,516 square miles (about the size of West Virginia) and round-trips to home might range from 100 to in excess of 500 miles. Furthermore, transportation is limited. Few students have cars and the

family vehicle is often committed to other projects, so students may share rides, ride a bus part-way, hitchhike, or often walk some distance. In general, going home can be a complex and potentially disruptive undertaking.

A survey by Cibik and Chambers (1988) found that 56.8% of the 155 Native American respondents indicated a need to go home often compared to 31.6% of Blacks, 24.4% of Hispanics, and 16.7% of Anglos. Native Americans also reported a tendency to miss classes to go home and help their families or to attend ceremonies or special activities. Subsequent interviews with Native American students revealed that while students realize the detrimental consequences of missing class, such consequences cannot be equated in importance to other more personal priorities.

Despite the fact that educators tend to view excessive going home behavior as negative or as a sign of student immaturity, our interviews on the going home issue elicited mostly positive responses. Here are some interview excerpts:

Lillian: (Goes home every weekend, sometimes during the week) It's not a problem with me...maybe for some.

Interviewer: Did you ever miss school for a ceremony?

L: Yes. At first.

I: Did you ever choose to stay in school rather than go to a ceremony?

L: Yes, but only if it was to just attend (a ceremony). I go when I am expected to be there.

I: When you are required do you mean?

L: When I am expected to participate I mean.

I: How did you feel about not attending a ceremony?

L: (Pause) Like maybe I wasn't enough of a Navajo that day.

I: A good feeling or a bad feeling?

L: Just a change. Like you have to decide these things for yourself sometimes.

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Ray: (Goes home once or twice a month on weekends.) For me it's a family thing not so much an Indian thing. Like if your (indicating the interviewer) mother didn't want you to miss coming home for Thanksgiving. You could say it's still Thanksgiving where you are and you can celebrate it there, but for your mother who wants you home it isn't really Thanksgiving for her.

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Jim: (Goes home almost every weekend.) Maybe more for the Hopi. It's not a Navajo problem to go home so much.

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Jeanette: (Goes home almost every weekend.) ...so when they go home it isn't necessarily bad. For my case seeing my family and helping (at the store) is very good for me. Everyone says how is school going and keep working hard we are so proud of you. I really set up a time on Saturday always to do my homework. Then I don't worry about it on Sunday or on Monday morning. I go home every weekend except during big times like a paper is due or midterms or for finals. They understand at home that I can't always be running up there. Sometimes they call me or come down too, but mostly I go there every time my schedule allows. I don't see (it) as negative at all in my case.

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Alice: (Seldom goes home now.) It might have been better for me at the first if I had gone home more, but we got to partying and going everywhere with those kids on the weekend. places. So that we never did any homework or even went to class on Friday or Monday. It was not like drinking or like that, but just goofing around and wasting time and cutting loose from not having to be at home and told what to do. Our parents never knew and I still don't tell mine, but I think they knew because my grades were terrible. And then they start to bug me and check up on me, but I know they are right and I am wrong. So it was good for me to go home and like report in, I guess, although I resented it and acted hurt. It was the best thing for me at that time. The others didn't (and now they) are gone so I guess my parents knew the best. Now that my grades are good, they trust me more and I don't always go home. (Laughs) Now I say I'm too busy now, if you want to see your girl you come here. And they do.

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Are there elements of competence in going home behavior? If the need and desire to go home are culturally dictated, then going home represents

an obligation with which the Native American must come to terms. Those interviewed expressed a belief that going home was not negative: they managed their studies in spite of frequent visits home and while at home they seemed to encounter encouragement and support.

Perhaps those for whom frequent home visits were a negative factor (in the sense that those visits pulled them away from the campus rather than reinforcing their student role), have already left the university and the persisters who remain represent those who reached a workable solution to integrating home visits with school obligations. If having reached such a solution is evidence of competence, there appears to be little colleges have done to acknowledge this since going home continues to be viewed as a factor contributing to attrition rather than as a challenge to which some Native American students can and do respond with behaviors favoring persistence. Whatever the case, it appears insufficient to simply ask the question, "Do you go home frequently?", and assume that a "yes" answer necessarily represents a deficiency.

It may follow that the university does not understand or appreciate or accommodate a Native American's cultural need to maintain attachments especially where that need appears to conflict with the majority culture belief that scholastic achievement is a product of focused, individual effort involving compromise and sacrifice. An unwillingness to allow the individual the means to balance pressing obligations as a Native American with his or her temporary role as a college student may contribute heavily to attrition.

"They Fail Hard"

All subjects reported that they made their decision to attend college early in life some as early as elementary school; others no later than junior high school.

Nelson: I made up my mind early about college in the sixth (grade). Me, I always knew I would succeed. Never doubted myself. My success thinking it came from inside. Not like some, you know. I never thought I would fail. I thought about school from the beginning that I would be in college and graduate someday with some hard work. Those kids, you know who never think that way as younger, as when they were kids, you know, they got the idea from the outside. From someone saying, 'Don't worry that in the past you didn't think on school, on going to college. Now come here (to college) and we will help you. You can do it, see?' They say that and encourage him and then his family says, 'Well, if the experts say he can do it, recruit him like, then maybe he can do it. Has the ability. Was just lazy or didn't listen before and maybe wasn't given a chance to show what he could do in that (high) school.

(long silence)

Interviewer: Anything to add?

N: I think they fail hard. Those guys who are recruited, you know, late. Who didn't think about college 'til someone said, 'Hey try this, you can do it.' I think they feel more hurt when they fail because it is sort of like everyone is counting on you, you know, and everyone says you can and when you don't (succeed) then it's like it was your fault all the time. So I think it hurts more to fail like that than to know you are going to go (to college) from the first and to reach inside and get the things you need, you know, to keep going.

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Interview subjects expressed concern that belated recruitment of otherwise non-college-bound Native Americans works against their success. The prudence and ethical considerations of encouraging reluctant students to enroll at a university on short notice seem to warrant further study. It is important to note that subjects interviewed were equally concerned about the belated recruitment of scholastically marginal and academically achieving students. At issue was the timing and the source of their decision to attend college coupled with the longevity of their commitment.

Competency may be enhanced by a student's early personal commitment to schooling. Perhaps earlier intervention can foster earlier commitment on the part of Native American learners.

Fish or Fowl?

Recently, local studies have explored the premise that a Native American's cultural orientation can be a factor in college performance. Schwartz (1985) interviewed a random sample of Native American students to determine their perceptions of campus social and academic life. In her study, she tabulated the results of interviews into frequency distributions and performed a cluster analysis for similar characteristics. From this she developed five "type" groups relative to their cultural orientation. These she placed on a continuum from "traditional" (with respect to Native American culture), to "bicultural", to "acculturated" (into the dominant white culture). One of the five groups was assessed as traditional, one as bicultural, and three as demonstrating varying degrees of acculturation. She reported that groups defined as more acculturated were least successful while bicultural and traditional students were most successful in school.

This conclusion differs from historical ideas of Native American success in school. McDermott (1974) contends that bicultural students are at a disadvantage since they are faced with the unenviable task of trying to master two diverse and mutually exclusive cultures. Havighurst (1957) concludes that "Indians who are most successful in school, especially in secondary and higher education, have committed themselves to learning and accepting the dominant culture." Carroll (1978) found in a study of Native Americans attending Haskell Institute that traditional students fared poorer on academic measures than did nontraditionals and that traditionals were more likely to dropout than were nontraditionals.

Schiller (1987) in a detailed study examined the relationship between levels of acculturation and psychosocial adjustment of Native American university students. She identified four levels of acculturation: 1)

bicultural, 2) Anglicized, 3) Native American oriented, and 4) marginal. Psychosocial factors included academic factors, social factors, psychological factors, and cultural factors. In general, she found that bicultural students demonstrated better psychosocial adjustment than non-bicultural students.

These studies have in common the challenge of defining what constitutes such conditions as "bicultural," "traditional," etc. so that it can be determined whether a given individual is, in a sense, fish or fowl. Our interview subjects speculated about such definitions by responding to a task to talk about the traits of hypothetical individuals found at each end of a schematic continuum stretching from "traditional Native American" to "typical white person". They also shared notions of how a person in the middle of such a continuum might be described. Finally, they were asked to place themselves on the continuum, to so place their campus Native American friends, and to place their same age Native American friends still on the reservation, or "back home." Here are representative results:

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Louise: (Indicating the end of the continuum labeled "Traditional Native American") They are quiet. That's a stereotype I guess. Introverted. A little bit insecure... I see them (traditionals) as kinda more thinkers more than they don't really speak up a lot. More comfortable around other Native Americans. They speak their language around other Navajos when they can. (Long pause.) They go home all the time; go home a lot. Some do well in school 'cause they don't go overboard on the socializing. They just study and go home. They look forward to going home. They don't party. Maybe a movie now and then. (Long pause.) They are real traditional. They have a strong identity with their tribe. They are real mature with a strong sense of themselves. At school they are out of place. Nervous. Friendly, but they seem shy. They will talk to you if you talk to them. Maybe because they don't speak up a lot, some (people) may think they are not smart.

Interviewer: (Indicating the end of the continuum labeled "Typical White Person") How about someone here?

L: More outgoing. Sense of humor. Some of them are so funny. Competitive. Outspoken. Smart. Show more dedication (to schoolwork). They feel more comfortable in school because (they are) not intimidated. They seem to know a lot, but at the same time they have a hard time relating when I try to explain my point-of-view. They are a different culture for sure with a different perspective. Most whites are pretty unique, each of them is different. They have strong personalities and are opinionated.

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Marge: (Discussing "Traditional Native American" traits.) The language (speaking and understanding Navajo) is not so much for me an indication of traditional. Our parents were forced to learn the white language. Maybe they didn't teach us Navajo with so much emphasis because they wanted us to avoid the trauma of knowing Navajo first and better than knowing English like they had gone through as children. But they do teach us the culture. The traditional values and ceremonies. I don't speak all that well, but I understand my grandparents and others. But I have a strong sense of my culture. I know the taboos and I filter a lot of what I don't know or understand--what is new to me--through my cultural thinking even though I don't fully speak the language.

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Eddie: (Indicating the "Traditional Native American".) They speak the Navajo language only. They don't understand or use English. They are wearing native clothes. Living on the reservation. (Pointing the other end of the continuum.) The whites are living in a city. They have a job and own a house and other assets. (Long pause.) They are living in the modern society. (Long pause.) They are thinking for the future instead of the past. In the middle (of the continuum) are people speaking both languages and they are probably living in the modern society, but also keeping the past and the traditions. (Long pause.) They are quiet and thoughtful like the traditional, but they maybe think more about the future and what is coming next.

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All subjects placed themselves near the middle of the continuum leaning in varying degrees toward white. About one-fourth placed their Native American college friends in the center and about one-fourth placed these individuals in the center leaning toward white; about half placed them leaning toward traditional. All placed their Native American "back home" friends near the "traditional" end of the continuum.

In studies of the effects of Native American traditionality on school

success, language maintenance is viewed as a strong factor in assessing level of traditionality. Our interview subjects did not place a strong emphasis on language as a traditional trait except to suggest that knowledge of the native language alone, or predominant knowledge of the native language to the detriment of English, are factors which might interfere with school success.

It is interesting to note that these persisters seem to have adopted the idea that white traits are associated with success in white society, but that maintenance of traditional traits to some degree is important to them. An ability to adopt new traits while maintaining a traditional perspective may be a characteristic of competence. Again it is a characteristic which is only marginally reinforced by colleges where indeed the expectation appears to be that academic success is closely associated with assimilation into the dominant culture. Meanwhile, observers and researchers more sensitive to cultural diversity, are finding that school competence is associated with some level of maintenance of native culture. Perhaps if otherwise qualified Native American students did not feel that their desire to maintain traditional ties was in conflict with their student role, they would be more likely to fulfill the requirements of an undergraduate education.

Conclusion

Have we achieved a competency model which accounts for the persistence of Native Americans in higher education? We have not. Have we moved in the direction of such a model? Yes. What is the next step? We believe that we can employ a similar combination of traditional statistical analysis and social science interview techniques to expand our study to a larger group.

One thing is clear: our evolving study will need to take a cross-cultural/multi-cultural approach in exploring competence and the model which emerges will have to account somehow for cultural diversity to an extent that all students benefit.

We believe that all students--Anglos, Native Americans, and other minorities; persisters and drop-outs--possess strengths and needs where the challenge of college persistence is concerned. At issue is our further belief that a distorted view of student strengths and needs is obtained when an inappropriate ethnocentric model of competence is used as a reference point in defining deficiencies. Competent behavior can take a wide variety of forms and can even, using the wrong model as a point of reference, be interpreted as deficient. At issue, we believe, is whether competencies which are valid in minority cultures are recognized, supported, rewarded, and valued by the dominate culture. To the extent that this occurs, persistence is enhanced.

Perhaps the abysmal attrition of Native Americans from higher education is not so much the failure of individual students to succeed as it is higher education's often unconscious insistence that they be pushed in the direction of an inappropriate notion of competence. Or perhaps more accurately, it may be that higher education is not sufficiently informed to recognize, nor sufficiently sensitive to value and accommodate another culture's model of competence. As a result, today's higher education systems may be largely predisposed to label as deficient any characteristic which fails to meet the dominant culture's preordained view of competence. Understanding, and eventually valuing the multiple competencies inherent in cultural diversity will certainly benefit Native American college students, and will ultimately enrich institutions of higher education and American society.

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